



THE POWER OF DESIRE IN AMERICAN SELF-IMAGINING

Or, THOMAS JEFFERSON’S LOST TRUNK

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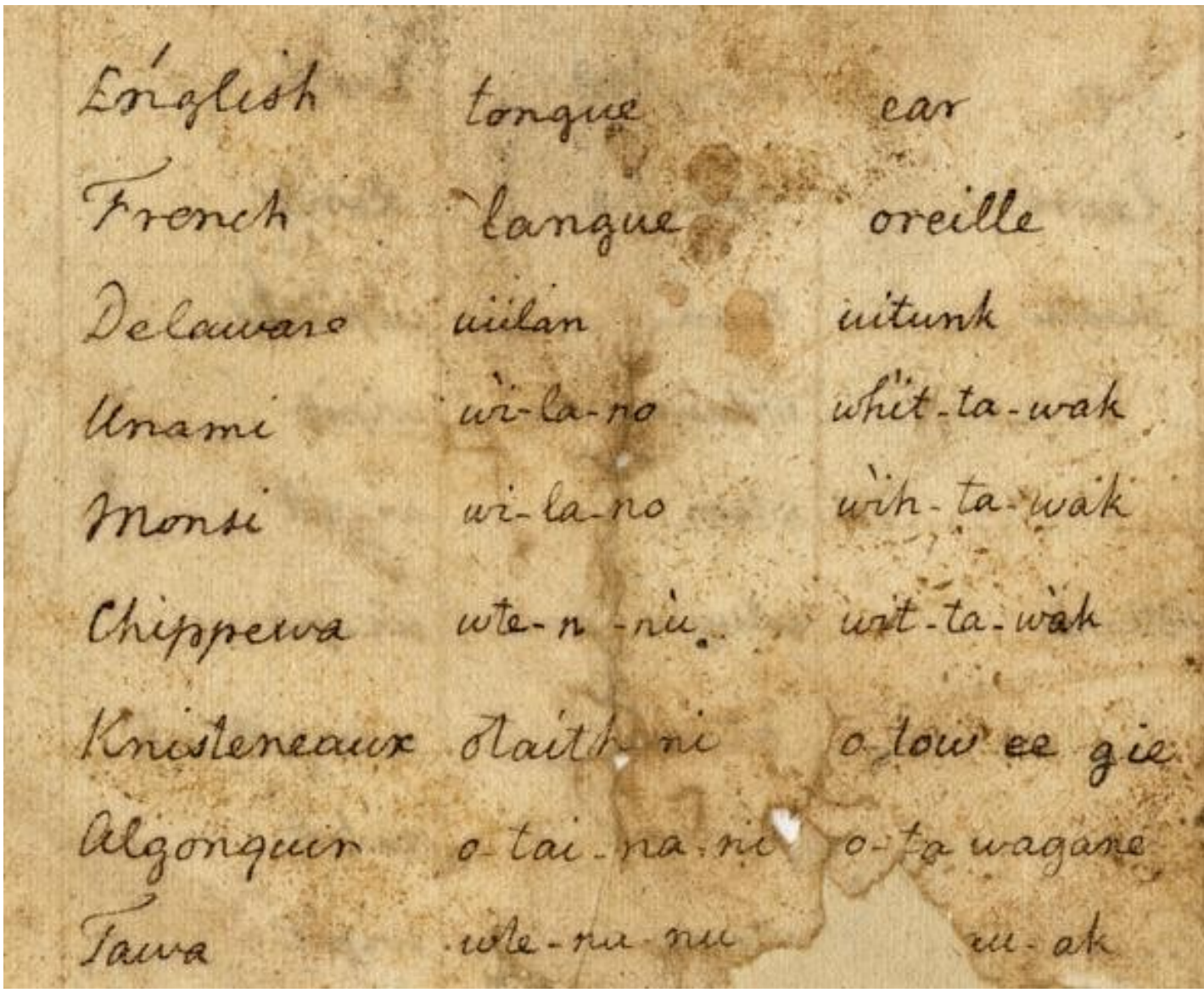
IMAGINED POWER OF AMERICAN WORDS

In the early republic, Americans struggled to distinguish themselves from Europeans as a culture of writers and researchers with equal but original potential. One avenue was to claim that the American language and American thought had a power and potential absorbed from the native peoples and their cultures.

THE THEFT OF A TRUNK – 1809

When Thomas Jefferson left the White House to return to civilian life in Monticello, a single trunk—out of all of his cargo—was stolen. In it, much to the disappointment of the thieves, was nothing but papers. Probably out of pique, the thieves dumped the contents into the James River. But that trunkful of paper was one of Jefferson’s most prized possessions: his treasured Indian vocabularies and word lists, collected over thirty years. A few damaged sheets were eventually retrieved, but the remainder is said to rest forever at the bottom of the James River. For Jefferson, these vocabularies held the promise of identifying the relationship of the American Indian tribes to the rest of the world’s races, a question of great interest in Europe and America throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.

Jefferson called it his “irreparable misfortune.” It was the definitive collection; there were no other copies, and (thanks in great measure to his own imperialist actions), many of these languages could never be collected again.



One of the few recovered word lists from Jefferson’s ravaged trunk. (Collection of the American Philosophical Society)

THE POWER OF THE EMPTY TRUNK

For Jefferson, these vocabularies held the promise of identifying the relationship of the American Indian tribes to the rest of the world’s races. He believed these vocabularies would answer the great questions of the times:

Was there a universal language?
Could it have begun in the Americas?
Was there a “filiality” between all languages?

And it would afford Jefferson (and all Americans) the elegant satisfaction that American words held the key to all these questions.

The loss of Jefferson’s treasured vocabularies becomes emblematic of the *imagined* power of American words. The young culture’s desire for a linguistic heritage filled the void left by lost research, and culminated in the fabricating of a literary genealogy for America.

METHODOLOGY

Historical Research: Covers major linguistic treatises from England, France, Scotland, and America—of the late 18th and early 19th century. Most reveal the conflict of magical criticism and scientific knowledge.
Primary Research: The American Philosophical Society’s holdings of Jefferson’s correspondence and the Pierre Duponceau Papers, as well as early 19th-century American fiction substantiate the developing valence of desire for a connection between “poetic” Indian words and American English.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Many 20th-century thinkers have speculated about what Sigmund Freud called “savage philosophy,” framing it as a post-Enlightenment recursion to pre-scientific thinking. Walter Benjamin called it “magical criticism,” and Michel Foucault postulated the “will to truth.” In *Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy*, Christopher Bracken describes how philosophers today project onto “savage” societies a type of “magical” ideality-based thinking. But they indulge in it themselves when reality-based thinking is *insufficient for our desired aims*. The effort to “refill” Jefferson’s trunk in the 1800s with self-fulfilling imaginings is a much earlier manifestation of this tendency.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS: Three instances of how such “magical criticism” expressed itself in the gap created by the lost trunk, despite Jefferson’s clearly positivist (Enlightenment) intentions in accumulating the vocabularies.

JOEL BARLOW

Poet and friend of Jefferson, Joel Barlow created a mythology for Jefferson’s enlightened Republican vision through American language. *The Columbiad* (1807), his sweeping epic poem about America, is based on his assertion that:

*The tongues of nations here their accents blend
Till one pure language thro the world extend.*

Barlow envisions the future of the world in which the language of America plays a fundamental role:

*The vision resume[s], and extend[s] over the
whole earth ... Assimilation and final union of
all languages. Its effect on education, and on the
advancement of physical and moral science.*

Barlow’s American future owes its existence to a mythic reversal of Babel through the enlightened evolution of humanity. This “one pure language” that will enable world peace is to be achieved “here” in America, arising out of the blending of all the other languages.

This idea, that the American experiment would give rise to a polyglot language, was suggested frequently in the early years of the Republic along with various short-lived proposals of changing the national language or altering it to the extent that it would better express American ideals. Barlow is working entirely in the realm of magical criticism, envisioning the unity of humanity culminating in this blended language, “one pure language” that will “through the world extend.”

PETER DUPONCEAU

In 1812, Peter S. Duponceau, a lawyer and linguist, became chair of the APS’s ambitious Historical and Literary Committee, charged with gathering all knowledge about the history and other ancient aspects of America, especially Pennsylvania. This included extensive work to reconstruct what had been lost by Jefferson.

While he had originally hoped to confirm the universal linguistic significance of American Indian languages, Duponceau instead develops proof that the Indian languages he has studied cannot possibly be comparable to other languages—not because of the inferiority of Indian languages (as Europeans like Buffon believe), but because the structure of Indian language, he finds, is more copious than any language of the Old World. Duponceau coins the term *polysynthetic* to explain the structures’ generative power, admitting to being “lost in astonishment at the copiousness and admirable structure of their languages.” He asks, “Does not this shew that many various combinations of ideas may take place in the human mind, of which we, Europeans by birth or descent, have not yet formed a conception?” His admiration for these American languages gave new fire to American commentators who were anxious to distinguish American letters at a time when British philologists were lamenting the decline of British English.

JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

The novelist James Fenimore Cooper was inspired by the research of Duponceau and his partner John Heckewelder on the language and customs of the Lenni Lenape Indians. Cooper is best known for his Leatherstocking Tales (1823-1841), including *The Last of the Mohicans* (1824). In creating his internationally beloved character, a white frontiersman named Natty Bumppo, he draws directly from the contemporary thrill of American discoveries, creating an American original: a white man who inherits “Injun eloquence” and “red man’s wisdom” from the Mohicans simply by living among them, proud to be a “man without a cross,” that is, purely white. Illiterate but fluent in Mohican, he is astonishingly eloquent when he speaks in his Mohican-influenced diction, naming himself “the pale face, whose eyes can make night as day, and level the clouds to the mists of the springs” (*Last of the Mohicans*).

